



Tasmanian Field Naturalists' Club

E A S T E R C A M P

R E V I E W

RHEBAN

March 26-31, 1959

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NOTE:

The last publication of the Club was
"The Tasmanian Naturalist",
Volume 11, No. 3, February, 1955.

The Easter Camp of 1959 was held at Rheban, seven miles south of Orford on the East Coast. We were favoured by fine weather throughout the long weekend, and were able to make full use of the opportunities offered for observations in this very attractive area.

The camp-site, made available to us by Mr. H. J. Gray, was formerly occupied by the old "Rheban" homestead, which was for a short time a hotel in the immediate post-war years, and was burned to the ground about ten years ago. It was a novel situation for us, pitching camp amid the exotic trees of the old garden, with old freestone barns and three very interesting water-holes close by.

The outlook from the camp was all that could be desired - almost at our feet was the rocky shore of Mercury Passage separating us from Maria Island, which dominates the views along this part of the coast. Just to the left was the northern end of $2\frac{1}{2}$ mile-long Rheban Beach, one of the best we have, and the old jetty now dilapidated and useless. To the south of the camp was the broad marshy estuary of the Sandspit River, which has been a bird sanctuary for some years. The steep hill immediately behind the camp was sparsely covered by Blue Gums, other hills further back were more heavily wooded.

The camp was erected and prepared most ably by the untiring Camp Committee, under the leadership of Mr. H.F. Sargison, during the preceding week, so that when the main party arrived just before 10 p.m. on Thursday evening cups of coffee were ready and members could retire to their beds which were already prepared.

On Good Friday morning most members climbed to the top of the hill behind camp, from which extensive views of the surrounding district were obtained. The numerous water channels through the marsh on both sides of the Sandspit River were clearly seen. After lunch the marsh was visited, the party following the track from the campsite to the ford across the River.

Following a very dry season there was very little water, except in the well-defined channels which were dug many years ago in efforts to drain the area for agricultural purposes, and little difficulty was experienced. Upon reaching the ford we followed the northern bank of the river to its mouth near the far end of the beach, and returned to camp along the seashore. The bird observers were well catered for in this area, where a variety of water and shore-birds were seen. Immediately behind the beach is a narrow strip of coastal scrub and bracken, which also provided much of interest.

The oldest homestead in the district, "Earlhan", on the southern side of the River, was visited on Saturday morning, the party travelling a distance of about 4 miles by car. Mrs. Chesterman must have been overwhelmed by the invasion of her home, but she readily allowed everyone to wander through the house, built in the early colonial style, and admire the way in which they have introduced modern amenities without disturbing the charm of the lovely old building. The stone-flagged verandah with its posts of Oyster Bay Pine is a feature. The old barn with its hand-made wool-press, the handiwork of John Cotton, the original owner, was also inspected. From "Earlhan" the party proceeded across the paddocks to the southern side of the Sandspit River mouth where lunch was taken. Most members spent the afternoon in that area, following their interests, while some of the more energetic ones walked to Cockle Bay, some miles down the coast. All returned safely to camp in good time to do justice to a fine meal prepared by our good chef, Andre.

Sunday morning dawned fine and mild so by previous arrangement a large fishing boat arrived from Triabunna to take our party across to Maria Island. It was unfortunate that neither at Rheban nor at Chinaman's Bay, on Maria Island, was there a jetty which could be used, so that it was necessary to ferry members from the shore to the boat and vice versa in two small dinghies. This occupied four valuable hours in all, so that our time on the island was unduly limited. The journey to Chinaman's Bay was uneventful, and a delightful spot was found for the picnic lunch, after which members scattered in various directions.

Some visited Long Point to see the ruins of convict cells still visible on the hillside, and then moved on to see what two small lagoons had to offer. Others followed the neck beach, and then crossed to Riedle Bay on the eastern side, while still others just roamed about or sat quietly on the beach. The return journey was more lively, as a slight N.E. breeze, which had been blowing gently in the morning, gradually increased in strength and brought the temperature down considerably. As someone said afterwards - "We travelled a long way up and down, but not very far along". However, members proved good sailors as well as good naturalists, and all agreed that the excursion had been very worthwhile and enjoyable. That evening (Easter Day) a short church service was held in the marquee after the dinner had been cleared up.

In contrast to the previous days, no organised outings were held on Monday, but members found plenty to occupy their time. Swimming proved a popular past-time on this day as well as on others, while short excursions were made by individuals or small parties to fill in gaps in their observations.

No account of an Easter Camp would be complete without reference to the evening activities. Our practice of arranging one or more campfires had to be abandoned because of the Fire Danger Period existing after the long dry summer. Campers gathered in the big marquee each evening, firstly, to report observations of the day, and secondly, to hear short talks on the history, natural and otherwise, of the District. Community singing and individual items completed the entertainment, which was followed by supper. On Saturday evening members retired to the hay-loft after supper to enjoy a real barn dance by lantern light.

The last night in camp has developed into a night of special entertainment, and this year was no exception. We were able to return hospitality to our hosts, Mr. & Mrs. Gray and family, and Mr. & Mrs. Chesterman and family at the concert on that evening, and a good number of the members provided a wide variety of items. Andre produced a beautifully decorated cake for supper, after which the hay-loft became the scene of a Masked Ball. The variety of costumes and masks which materialised for the occasion was remarkable, and was a good indication of the resourcefulness of the participants.

Our special thanks are due to Athol Yeoland for providing music for our entertainments.

And so we came to the end of another camp, for which our Club has earned a fine reputation during more than fifty years. That it continues to attract such large attendances year after year is a warm tribute to the organisers to whom we all say a very hearty "Thank You". busy

Tuesday saw all hands/with the task of packing up almost ten tons of gear and personal belongings, and clearing up the site. Light drizzle set in during the morning, but by that time almost all tents were safely stowed away and the work well advanced. The task was completed soon after lunch and the last persons left the site before 3 p.m.

We have been complimented by Mr. Gray for the manner in which we tidied up the site before leaving. It has always been a source of pride that we do this work thoroughly, and we are glad to know that our efforts are appreciated.

Those who attended the camp were:-

Messrs. B. Allen, H.K. Aves, D. Branagan, A.B. Brownell, G. Brownell, J. Chick, H. Dean, B.O. Eckland, J. Fergusson, D. Guilbert, A.M. Hower, R. Hower, B. Hicks, F. King, R. King, J. Lewis, J. Lucas, R. Morrisby, J. Rossiter, H.F. Sargison, M.S.R. Sharland, F.J. Swann, F. Tayler, E. Troughton, L.E. Wall, P. Webster, K. Wells, D. Wilson, A. Yeoland.
Mesdames M. Bennett, Branagan, A. Button, E. Fleming, Scott, F. Tayler, Thorp, L.E. Wall, A. Yeoland.
Misses B. Allen, S. Aves, G. Aves, E. Aves, S. Barry, M. Branagan, E. Brice, R. Featherstone, M. Hewitt, P. Hewitt, M. Ibbott, Nix-James, Jensen, S. Johnston, Y. Louez, L. Miller, A. Medhurst, J. Mitchell, E. Morrisby, C.H. Mosey, H. Nash, Parish (2), P. Perkins, Yeoland, I.B. Pollit, E. Roberts, E. Ross, K. Sargison, P. Tayler, A. Wall, B.Wall, C. Wall, M. Westbrook, Masters P. Barrow, D. Donbrovski, P. Fergusson, M. Hewitt, E. Johnston, Lucas, P. McCormack, P. Wall, R.Wall, S. Yeoland.

BOTANICAL OBSERVATIONS

(by H.K. Aves)

From a floral point of view Rheban was rather disappointing, though no doubt there was a great deal of botanical interest which went unnoticed for the lack of a really skilled leader in botany. Apparently nobody saw blooms of the autumn flowering wattle, Acacia botrycephala, though this has been recorded at all previous camps, nor the typically autumn orchid, Eriochilus autumnalis.

The dominant species of Eucalyptus around the camp was the blue gum, E. globulus, with the peppermint E. linearis a good second. Recorded from the hillside above the camp were bracken Pteris aquilina, heath Epacris impressa, ground heath Lissanthe strigosa, cranberry Astroloma humifusum, Cyathodes spp, dogwood Pomaderris apetala, box Bursaria spinosa, Epilobium glabellum, Geranium rotundifolium, Hovea, bluebell Wahlenbergia gracilis.

On the saltmarsh, samphire Salicornia arbuscula and S. australis, and on the sandy strip between river and beach a light scrub of Banksia marginata native cherry Exocarpus cupressiformis, boobyalia Acacia cophophorae, blackwood A. melanoxylon, black wattle A. recurvans, with such low shrubs as running postman Kenradia prostrata and Viola hederacea.

Between Earllham and Cockle Bay the following were added from pasture, gullies and sandhills - burr Acaena sanguisorbae, sag Xerotes longifolia, prickly noses Acacia verticillata, tea tree Leptospermum scoparium, she-oak Casuarina quadrivalvis bull-oak C. stricta, parrots food Goodenia ovata, climbing blue-berry Billardiera longifolia, Mesembryanthemum acculatiale, whitebeards Leucopogon australis & L. richiei, Blueberry Dicella tasmanica, prickly beauty Pultanea juniperina, Bedfordia linearis, Eucalyptus ovata, false boobyalia Proportum insulare, Isotoma fluviatilis. Many people were intrigued here by the sea-holly Eryngium vesiculosum, a creeping thistle-like plant.

On Maria Island, from Long Point and Chinaman's Bay Eucalyptus ovata & E. globulus, Acacia decurrens, A. verticillata, Bursaria spinosa, Bedfordia linearis, Pomadouris apetala, Leptospermum scoparium, Astroloma humifusum, Isotoma flaviatilis, Dodonea viscosa, Casuarina quadrivalvis, & Myoporum insulare, an almost exact replica of the opposite shore.

From various walks around Rheban the following were brought in, including the only two orchids found in bloom - Chiloglottis reflexa and Acianthus viridis - silver wattle A. dealbata, two Helichrysums, Anthisteria ciliata and Geranium ciliata.

The listing and most of the naming were ably carried out by Miss A. Wall and Miss M. Branagan.

MARINE LIFE (by F.J. Swann)

Those interested in any branch of marine biology had a happy time at Rheban, which, on account of the diverse character of the foreshore, showed varied types of marine fauna and flora.

The rocky coast, although not thickly populated, yielded chitons, limpets, dog whelks and the ubiquitous Melaraphe unifasciata. This little shell, purplish white and about $\frac{1}{4}$ " long, extended as usual from below waterline to the highest splash level, offering a puzzle to many to understand how it survives under such harsh conditions at the upper levels where food supply must be very meagre.

The sandy beach yielded the usual bivalve sand-burrowing shells, as well as others washed up from offshore.

A third and interesting area was the large expanse of marsh, where land and water boundaries were not clearly defined or constant. Shallow pools and other water in the marsh seemed to provide, on the muddy bottoms, optimum conditions for Salinator fragilis, a mollusc that is able to tolerate great variations in the degree of salinity in the water. These shells were present in thousands.

Apart from molluscs, many other forms of sea life were in evidence - echinoderms, barnacles, sea anemones and a variety of seaweeds.

Our very practical marine expert, Mr. J. Fergusson, brought in many interesting specimens of freshly-caught fish, but in the absence of a specialist these were studied more for their gastronomic than their ichthyological interest.

Good work was done by Mr. D. Wilson in classifying and naming shells brought in. These included - Mytilus spp., Modiolus spp., Glycymeris striatularis, Collana solida, Pecten meridionalis - Equichlamys bifrons - Chlamys asperimus (Scallops), Amblychilepos javanicensis, Austrocochlea concolorata, Phasianella australis, Anorena undulata, Colus australis, Dicathais textilosa, Notocyprea piperita, Pleuroplaca australasia.

INSECTS ETC.

Insects in the area were quite varied, and included a number of the large brown mantis, many of which were observed laying their eggs.

Only two species of butterflies were seen flying - the Meadow Argus and the Common Brown. However, special mention should be made of the discovery near the mouth of the Sandspit River of a colony of the scarce Tasmanian Hairstreak (Pseudamenus chlorinda). This now enlarges the known range of this species considerably.

Another important find, made at "Earlham", was one specimen of the St. Andrews Cross Spider, which is rare in Tasmania.

REPTILES (by A.M. Hewer)

Rhoban proved disappointing, during the 1959 Easter Camp, for the study of reptiles. Possibly the scarcity of these generally can be explained by lack of sustained sunshine during this period.

Only two species of snakes were seen - the Copperhead or a Superb Snake (Denisonia superba) and the White-lipped Whip Snake (D. coronoides). The Tiger Snake (Notechis scutatus), although known to occur in the area, was not seen.

Lizards were more numerous, but some species which should occur there were not seen.

The most common lizard was the small skink, Leiolapisna metallicum, the one we see most often in suburban gardens, and very easily tamed. In this genus three other species were reported:- (i) L. entrecasteauxii - of which the male follows the usual pattern found in birds, in that he has the most conspicuous and bright colours. He has a bright red stripe running along the side between the front and hind legs: (ii) L. trilineatum - this is the only skink found in Tasmania which normally lays eggs, and is usually found abundantly in sandy country: (iii) L. ocellatum, Tasmania's only indigenous lizard, of which only one specimen was collected, though it should be common in the area.

Of the Aganids, or dragons, only one was seen - the little Mountain Dragon (Amphibolurus diemensis). Although known in some districts by such ridiculous names as "Bloodsucker" or "Death Adder", this is one of the most harmless members of the reptile fauna of Tasmania and makes a most delightful pet. However, it must be kept with an abundance of live food (insects only).

The Southern Blue-tongued Lizard (Tiliqua nigrolutea), which occurs abundantly in the Orford-Rheban area, was only seen once. Lack of hot sunny days would probably be the reason for the scarcity of this species.

The Smooth Rock Lizard (Egernia whitii) was common on the rocky slopes of the hill behind the camp, and many specimens were brought in for identification.

The Slender Skink (Tiliqua casuarinae) occurs at Orford and at Brean Creek, so should also occur at Rheban, but no sightings were reported.

Frogs were very scarce, due to the dry season. Only two species were recorded - the Brown Tree Frog (Hyla ewingii) and the Burrowing Frog (Limnodynastes dorsalis). Many others should be found, and further observations in the area should produce all of the following:- Brown Froglet (Crinia signifera), Smooth Froglet (C. laevis), Green & Gold Bell Frog (Hyla aurea), Yellow-striped or Marbled Frog (L. tasmaniensis), and the Tasmania Toadlet (Pseudophryne bibroni).

BIRD NOTES.(by L. E. Wall)

Rheban district can be regarded as a good area for birds as it contains a wide variety of habitats. During Easter, 1959, observations were made over a wide area, but not to any extent in the forested parts, and the following notes cannot be considered exhaustive.

The two large grazing properties in the district, "Rheban" and "Earlhan", consist mainly of grass paddocks with a good number of eucalypts left as shade trees. Between these is the Sandspit River, a small stream rising in the hills, and fringed in its lower reaches by large areas of marsh. The last mile or so is tidal, large areas of mud-flats being exposed at low tide. The river breaks through the beach to the sea over a sand-bar which is subject to considerable movement.

The grasslands were well populated with Spurwinged Plovers, Eastern Rosellas, Musk Parrots, White-backed Magpies, Noisy Minors, Grey Thrushes, Grey Butcherbirds and Ravens. Among clumps of shade trees Green Rosellas, Dusky Woodswallows, Yellow-throated Honeyeaters, Black-headed Honeyeaters, Yellow Wattlebirds, Swift Parrots, Striated Pardalotes and Spotted Pardalotes, were also in evidence. One Brown Hawk was seen.

In the narrow belt of bush and coastal heath between the beach and the marsh a few more were added to the list - Flame Robins, Scarlet Robins, Blue Wrens, Grey Fantails, and Crescent Honeyeaters. Many other from the open country were also seen here, perhaps the most noticeable being the Musk Parrots which always seen to be very numerous in this corner.

The heavier bush country away from the coast received little attention during the camp, but the following were listed from this area - Common Bronzewing Pigeon, Brown Thornbill, Yellow-tailed Thornbill, Black Jay, Black Magpie, Brown Scrub Wren, Dusky Robin, Spine-billed Honeyeater, Strong-billed Honeyeater and Spotted Groundbird or Quail-thrush.

The last-named lives on the ground, feeding on seeds very largely, but unlike the pigeons it is difficult to flush. Its mode of life renders it easy prey to prowling cats, and for that reason it is becoming quite rare in the vicinity of settlement.

The lower reaches of the river and the marsh provided the best opportunities for bird observations, and good use was made of them. This area has been a bird sanctuary for about ten years, and the property owners have taken a great pride in it. Ducks were not very numerous, but this is not unusual for autumn. A small flock of Black Ducks and about 100 Grey Teal were seen, and there may have been a few Chestnut Teal present. About 100 Black Swans were also seen on the estuary, and four Pelicans graced the sandspit on our first visit to it. White-faced Herons fed widely over the mudflat and a Brown Bittern was found along the edge of the marsh. A Large Egret was also reported by one observer. A Caspian Teal patrolled the river, while Little Pied Cormorants and Large Black Cormorants rested on a fallen tree. The mudflats also provided a good feeding ground for Spurwinged Plovers, Silver Gulls, Pied Oystercatchers (34), Red-capped Dotterels (6), Double-banded Dotterels (60) and Little Stints. The figures quoted in brackets were obtained in a count taken at the mouth of the river on our second visit, when the tide was high. On that occasion 70 Crested Terns were seen also. Other birds on the marsh were the White-fronted Chat, Pipit and the Striated Field Wren (heard only). We were disappointed that no Native Hens were seen (one was heard), but we were told that they deserted the marsh about three years ago. The absence of Swamp Hawks was also very noticeable, though two were seen over the camp on the last day.

Along the beach were several pairs of Hooded Dotterels, and a small flock of Fairy Terns was also reported, but this was not confirmed. A number of dead Fairy Penguins was found, and one other was seen floating close inshore.

Off the coast a fine pair of White-breasted Sea Eagles was seen on several occasions, also a few Gannets and some Large Black Cormorants. A pair of Pacific Gulls frequented the old Rheban jetty.

During the crossing to Maria Island on Easter Day, White-breasted Cormorants were added to the list near Lachlan Island, and on the return journey a pair of Shy (?) Albatrosses was seen at a considerable distance. As we dropped anchor in Chinaman's Bay we had a very good view of a Musk Duck near the jetty. It seemed quite unperturbed by our presence and made no effort to move away. As we returned to the boat three hours later it was still there, apparently asleep. A flock of Little Pied Cormorants rested on a rocky point during most of the day.

The only bird seen on Maria Island and not on the mainland was the New Holland, or Yellow-winged, Honeyeater, but it was interesting to observe a considerable number of Welcome Swallows and Tree Martins, both of which were very scarce on the mainland.

Migratory birds were conspicuous throughout the camp by almost total absence, the only exception to this being the Dusky Wood-Swallow. With Easter falling before the end of March this year, it was anticipated that we would see plenty of the migrants, but it seems that the long dry summer must have caused them to leave earlier than usual. As mentioned previously, only one pair of Swamp Hawks was seen. Among the Asiatic waders we might have expected to see Curlews, Bar-tailed Godwits, Curlew Sandpipers and others, but our only observation was of a few Little Stints.

We fared little better with bush migrants. Very few Welcome Swallows and Tree Martins were seen, and only one Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike. Two Cuckoos were heard only - the Pallid, and one of the Bronze Cuckoos.

Introduced birds were plentiful: Goldfinches, House Sparrows and Starlings all being very common.

The Blackbird, which has increased to pest proportions in many parts of Tasmania was only seen once; and the Kookaburra was noted near Cockle Creek. This bird is also dispersing widely, though much more slowly.

MAMMAL NOTES. (by L. E. Wall)

Special attention was not given to the occurrence of native animals in the camp area, but a number came under notice.

Tasmanian Brush-tailed Possums were very common and tame about the camp, some visiting the kitchen to collect food scraps. We did not see any Ring-tails.

On the hills behind camp a Brush Wallaby (commonly referred to as the Kangaroo) was seen on the first morning. No doubt many more would have been seen if more time had been spent in the forest areas.

Two other marsupials were found, both road casualties between the camp and Orford: one was the Tasmanian Rat-Kangaroo, and the other the Eastern Native Cat. Both species are common in bush country throughout the State.

Of marine mammals, the skulls of three species were picked up on the beach. These were of the Australian Fur Seal, the Common Dolphin and the Bottle-nosed Dolphin. One evening Mr. Ellis Troughton gave us an instructive talk on the Dolphins, describing the chief characteristics of each.



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